

VU Research Portal

[Book Review of:] Reading the Bible Theologically, by Darren Sarisky

Dubbink, Joep

published in

Journal of Reformed Theology
2019

DOI (link to publisher)

[10.1163/15697312-01303013](https://doi.org/10.1163/15697312-01303013)

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

document license

Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

citation for published version (APA)

Dubbink, J. (2019). [Book Review of:] *Reading the Bible Theologically*, by Darren Sarisky. *Journal of Reformed Theology*, 13(3-4), 329-331. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15697312-01303013>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address:

vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl



BRILL

JOURNAL OF REFORMED
THEOLOGY 13 (2019) 329–355

JOURNAL
OF REFORMED
THEOLOGY

brill.com/jrt

Book Reviews



Darren Sarisky, *Reading the Bible Theologically* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), vii–xix + 407 pp., £90.00, hardcover (ISBN 9781108497480).

Reading this book offered a surprise, and I still don't know if it was a pleasant one. Neither the title nor the (absent) subtitle of the book had prepared me for an extended exposition of the way Augustine of Hippo reads the Bible, followed by an attempt to develop a hermeneutical method that matches Augustine's.

The author, clearly an expert in Augustinian studies, takes ample time to explain all the subtleties and intricacies of Augustine's hermeneutics. He offers interesting examples; Augustine is very sensible to the way signs and words work. This 'classical semiotics' is explained in great detail, together with many more of Augustine's hermeneutical insights. I can't do justice to this first part of the book, because lack of space prohibits me and because I am by no means an expert on Augustine.

So far, so good. However, the second part of the book, "A Constructive Proposal," leaves me with many questions, mainly because of its attempt to offer a hermeneutical method for our modern or postmodern situation. When studying Augustine, it is impossible to separate the exegete and the theologian, but is this complete identification of theology and exegesis still viable in the twenty-first century?

The author constructs his method of reading theologically as a contrast to what he calls 'naturalism,' the way of reading that is familiar to us since Descartes and Spinoza and is based on skills and tools rather than on beliefs (167). He offers an alternative: a theological interpretation firmly based on the Christian dogma. "This determination of the aim of interpretation begins with a doctrine of God in place from the outset: a doctrine of the Trinity is operative; faith in God is not written off as mere prejudice that infects and distorts the practice of reading" (288). Of course, a forced 'secular' reading of a biblical text can result in obfuscating the theological aims of the

text. But aren't we, by avoiding the Scylla of that extreme position, heading for the Charybdis of a too heavily loaded theological reading? I am afraid we cannot bypass the questions raised by today's hermeneutical situation by approaching the Bible armed with the heavy harness of an unshaken Christian dogma.

The book remains on a very abstract level; hardly any real exegesis is presented, nor is there any real interaction with recent exegetes or biblical theologians, which is a serious omission. Dialogue between systematic theologians and biblical scholars is usually rather tense, but when systematic theologians construct their own framework of interaction with the Bible, leaving aside almost all results of biblical scholarship, that doesn't help. It can't be true that all work done in biblical research is irrelevant for theologians, even for those who stick to the Christian dogma and the method of Augustine. A formula like "Theological commentary requires not the rejection of historical analysis, but its integration with doctrinal perspectives" (259) could offer an opening, but the following discussion with James Barr shows that there is no real room for results from biblical scholarship. The dissimilarities Barr perceives between the Jesus of the Gospels and the Son of the Father according to the Christian Creed bring Sarisky to an ironic smile, as anyone "within the mainstream of the Christian tradition" *knows* that both are the same (263).

There is more. Sarisky takes the unity of the Old and New Testaments, the 'Christian Bible,' for granted and skips all questions about the relation between both. No place for reading together with Jewish scholars, nor any use for secular biblical research, historical-critical or any other kind, as this would result in *scientia*, while the Christian dogma only has to be deepened by reading the Bible and acquiring more *sapientia*, insight into the *res* of the Bible, the triune God. Yes, that is a hermeneutical circle, as discussed on pp. 108–121; but apparently supported by Gadamer and Heidegger (109), Sarisky sees this circle as an advantage instead of as a problem; you need knowledge of God to understand the texts at all.

That the author calls his approach 'contextual' is confusing. True, Augustine pays a lot of attention to the psychological and philosophical 'context' of the presumed reader. However, this book is anything but what contextual means nowadays. It does not evaluate how reading in different contexts (social, political, gender, sexual, ethnic, or religious) might influence the reading process, but absolutizes *one* context instead: reading according to Augustine's hermeneutics and orthodox Christianity. Exegetical insights that differ from that context are not to be expected and unwanted: we know, after all, already what we believe.

Conclusion: a great book for those interested in Augustine and his views on scripture, but very problematic as a contribution to (post)modern hermeneutics.

Joep Dubbink

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, The Netherlands

j.dubbink@vu.nl